

MACS 30000 Perspectives on Computational Analysis

Short Paper #1: Ethics of "Taste, Ties, and Time"

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The new digital age brings diverse approachable data as the source of researches, but at the same time, increasingly raises ethical concerns and leads to ethical problems. The “Taste, Ties, and Time” (T3) project is one such example.

T3 is a research on social networks with the data of an entire cohort of college students collected from their Facebook accounts and official housing and academic records provided by the college. However, the public release of T3 exposed the subject to privacy breach. By assessing the ethical issues of this research with Salganik’s four principles of ethical research, one may be more aware of how they should be adhered to. What follows is the brief analysis of Ethics of “Taste, Ties, and Time”.

1. Respect for Persons

The first principle Respect for Persons says individuals should be treated as autonomous. The T3 researchers did take some positive actions to protect identity and privacy of the subject showing their intention to respect persons. For example, all the data were collected with the permission of college being studied and Facebook.com; only those data that were accessible by default by each RA were collected; all identifying information was deleted or encoded; the cultural taste labels were meant to

be released after a delay; etc. (Lewis 2008)

However, the fact that the source of the dataset was easily identified as Harvard College shows that the T3 researchers' endeavors have severe flaws so that they didn't manage to protect their subject, as a result violating the privacy of the subject.

Some students may regard Facebook as a way to interact with friends or families instead of a public stage, which means the information they shared on Facebook may be very private and only viewable to others within their networks. But the RAs (tentatively regard them as reliable people) within the network, are sharing restricted to "in network" participants information to the public. The T3 researchers, in consequence, observed, utilized, and even released the private information.

Further, though the identifying information was encoded and cultural taste labels were planned to be released after a delay, the researchers should be aware that with the rapid development of the computer technics and people's increasing exposure to and rely on the internet, nearly all information of a person can be reached via the internet. So it's easier to deduce one's identity with some random information and those steps above are of no help in preventing the identification of the subject.

If the subject had been informed of all these information disclosure possibilities and still given consent about this project of using their information, then they would be responsible for their own decision. However, the T3 researchers didn't achieve that; even worse, they didn't ask for consent from the students being observed, though they had been permitted by the college or Facebook. The

students' profile information was simply considered accessible for research ignoring their individual desires. The college or Facebook may have informed students with such researches' existence via terms of service or something like that. But when conducting a specific research, researchers should get specific informed consent providing the goals, methods or potential consequences of the research. In this research, informing the subject will hardly affect the subject's attitude towards online or offline relationships, so it's necessary and practical to let the subject know and get their consent before conducting the research.

2. Beneficence

The second principle, Beneficence, involves two parts: (1) do not harm and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms.

When the T3 researchers released the dataset, they did want to protect the source by regulating that prospective users of this dataset must read and sign a user agreement. But it seems meaningless as studies have shown that users frequently simply "click through" such agreements without fully reading them or recognizing they are entering into a legally binding contract (Gatt 2002). So the researchers can hardly monitor or control the secondary use of the dataset, which makes the subject lose control of their own information, thus casting a threat to the subject's personal information.

The potential harm from the disclosure of personal information in this case could be damaging some relationships (online or offline), making one feel embarrassed or stressed, etc.

Besides, as the researchers themselves, they can barely accurately foresee the result of the research and impact of it. In most cases, the researchers also have some standpoints affected by race, nationality, culture background, etc. and be somehow biased. No one can be 100% neutral. So the T3 research itself may contain some preference and tendentiousness unconsciously. This means the research including its research methods, wording, range of respondents, etc. can do some harm to some people, no matter research participants or readers.

The T3 researchers could have got informed consent of participants before research to avoid unwillingly harm of privacy disclosure. They could have attempted to monitor participants and offered assistance to anyone that appeared to had been or would be harmed. They could have also tried to minimize the number of participants to decrease the potential harm.

3. Justice

The third principle Justice addresses the distribution of the burdens and benefits of research. The T3 research tested how race and cultural tastes affect relationships, their unique dataset helping achieve this academic goals; however, though the subject in this case doesn't seem particularly vulnerable, it put their personal information at risk. Obviously the T3 researchers did not intend to harm the subject to get the scientific progress, but they actually did so. The group of participants bears the burdens of the research without being informed and the society as a whole benefits, which falls short of the Justice principle.

4. Respect for Law and Public Interest

The final principle refers to Respect for Law and Public Interest, consisting of two components: (1) Compliance and (2) Transparency-based Accountability. The T3 research has passed the IRB review and released the data source to public, and as mentioned before, T3 researchers asked potential users of the dataset to sign the agreement, which seems that the T3 researchers did show some respect for law and public interest. However, since they failed to get the consent from the participants, they have invaded privacy of the subject, which broke the law and damaged the public interest.

In conclusion, the T3 research has violated the four principles but each to different extent.

After balancing the pros and cons of using the data for my own research, considering the violation of privacy of the subject and consequently harm to the subject, public and me as a researcher as well, I would say not until I got consent from at least some of the participants. But there can be some exceptive situations such as if someone as a subject of this research get kidnapped, then analyzing his or her data would be a necessity. Though it seems more like police's stuff instead of a social science researcher's.

Reference

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